

Feminine Principle and Theory U

Arawana Hayashi

ARAWANA HAYASHI is a teacher of meditation in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition, and a lifelong dancer. Since 2004 she has worked with *Theory U* author Otto Scharmer to apply contemplative and physical disciplines to effect transformative change in teams and organizations. She is creator of *Social Presencing Theater*, a new synthesis between theatre, embodied presence, dialogue, and stillness.

MANY OF THE WISDOM TRADITIONS IN THE WORLD offer views on the feminine. Feminine principle, as it was introduced to me by my meditation teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, is a very profound topic, and I have found it to be a completely practical principle in work and everyday living. Feminine principle has nothing whatsoever to do with gender or gender politics. Although women's wisdom is a very worthwhile topic, it is not really the focus here. The essence of feminine principle is space – vast, vast space. It is an investigation of the open space of mind and heart of both women and men. And it invites each of us to discover how we can manifest more spaciousness and openness in our daily living and our work with others.

There is a habitual tendency for many of us to focus our attention on content – on the words, on the figures, and on the actions. Feminine principle invites us instead

to notice the space or the background. It expands our attention to the atmosphere or the environment. It invites us to notice the space out of which expressions arise. Maybe this seems a little obscure, but it is actually very present and in everyone's experience. It is perhaps the invisible or intangible sense of our experience – not easily talked about, but there nevertheless.

FEMININE PRINCIPLE INVITES US TO TAKE A BIGGER VIEW, TO SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE, AND TO RELAX A LITTLE.



Feminine principle invites us to take a bigger view, to see the whole picture, and to relax a little.

And what is Theory U?

Theory U's originator, Otto Scharmer, says it is three things. First, it is a framework describing a change process. Second, it is a method for effecting change personally and organizationally, in communities and globally. And third, it is a description of phenomena in the world – what is naturally happening.

Theory U is a response to the times and is an approach to address complex issues – including climate change, poverty, health, financial instability, and education. It addresses issues that cannot be solved by relying on an upgraded version of the past. These issues require innovative, fresh, and deeper ways of knowing and acting.

As a change process, Theory U can be seen in three main parts – *sensing*, *presencing* and *realizing*. The sensing phase can be divided into first seeing clearly what is present and then sensing into what is observed. Literally, we are invited to use our sense perceptions rather than relying on past or second-hand information. We are asked to suspend our judgments, opinions, assumptions and mental models, and to use our eyes and ears and the feeling of our bodies to sense into whatever the context is. We are asked to convene groups and to get out and talk to people – to pay attention in an unbiased way, to empathize with those we interview, to watch and to listen with full attention as we take learning journeys. We are asked to notice how our bodies feel and include this information as a vital part of our sensing process.

One of the main tools for sensing is listening. Listening and dialogue practice is an application

of feminine principle. Listening makes a space. It is holding an open, unbiased and caring space for another person to speak into. Feminine principle is a sense of warmth and open heartedness – unconditional friendliness that comes into the pauses in conversations and into our moments of silence. It is unconditional because it is not based on anything in particular. It is not caused by circumstances – because they were nice to me or because I want something from them, I will be friendly to them. For no particular reason, just because we are human and appreciate our life, we can provide a friendly listening space for other people.

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As we sit in a circle in dialogue groups we are invited to listen into the centre of the space. The voice of collective wisdom emerges from the space of the whole. As change leaders we are invited to cultivate the capacity to engage in conversations from this place. My teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche, called this the practice of “spontaneous insight.”

Presencing

Spontaneous insight requires paying attention and being present in every moment. We are grounded in our bodies and in the present. From there we pay attention to what is emerging, and how we pay attention affects the outcome. In Theory U, listening into the space and learning from the future as it emerges is called presencing. After being thoroughly immersed in the sensing and learning processes, we take time to let go of all our expertise and experience. Rather than moving directly into problem solving or brainstorming, we take time for retreat and reflection. This could be individually or collectively, it could be a short break on a longer period, but it is a time for inner work. This could include solo time in nature or some kind of meditation or other inner cultivation practices that help us get in touch with who we really are and how we might best benefit community and planet. It is deliberately bringing more space into our work and deeply joining our personal life journey to the community change effort.





Perhaps stopping, letting go and hanging out in a space of not-knowing takes a leap of faith. Hanging out without answers or a plan can be scary, and presencing might seem like a waste of time. Paying attention to the space and to the feeling quality in the room could be seen as wasting time, particularly if there is a disproportionate value given to jumping around, fixing people and doing things. Feminine principle is all about empty, open, agenda-less time and space. This approach asks us to trust that human beings individually and collectively have wisdom. In fact, we could say that people have all the wisdom they need to solve the world's problems. As change agents we therefore create situations in which this wisdom naturally comes forth.

Wisdom is a high-minded word, but I am using it to indicate an ordinary intelligence that speaks for the

whole. We can trust that the wisdom will come and will crystallize into insights, innovations, and fresh ideas. Intelligence that is not based on a small-minded sense of self, but rather is inseparable from complete openness, is the feminine principle.

Feminine principle can also be a trickster. Creativity cannot be scheduled, controlled and made to play by rules. It needs an environment with the right balance of freedom and discipline. It needs a container, a space. It needs an atmosphere of open playfulness, humour and some wildness. Creativity, by nature, is a wild card.

Realizing

Masculine principle describes how to manifest. It describes the skilful means needed to engage in compassionate, powerful and wise action. Perhaps it can be connected to the right side of the U – the *realizing* process of bringing insights, sparks of inspiration, and crystals of ideas into prototypes. Here we move into action quickly and create small projects that can move the vision forward. We bring our vision down to earth and join the ideas with all the on-the-ground practicalities, restrictions, demands and obstacles.

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Recognizing the gap between what we sense is possible and the current reality is often a place of discouragement and frustration. Here, remembering the gentleness of the feminine principle can encourage us to lighten up and extend some kindness to ourselves and to the ones we work with. Working to change our team, our organization, or our community is not an easy job. It requires fearlessness of the masculine principle, the gentleness of the feminine principle, and the intelligence to know how to balance these in the challenges that we encounter.

CREATIVITY, BY NATURE, IS A WILD CARD.

I once heard Otto say, “Sometimes all we know is which direction to face and where to put our foot down for the next step.” Knowing which direction to face is feminine principle; taking that step is masculine principle. And moving forward is always possible. ♦

